

Institution: Newcastle University
Unit of Assessment: 29 English Language and Literature
Title of case study: Migration, Readership and the Public Perception of Diaspora and Identity
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Consideration of the connections between diasporic literature and the migrant experience have been largely confined to professional critics and have focused on metropolitan centres. This project took this literature, and these debates, outside the academy, and away from London. Working with lay readers from across the UK, and over four continents, the project fostered a 'devolved' debate on diaspora literature, moving it well beyond the conventional centres of migrant writing and reading. Involving school-children and adults, public libraries and book groups, migrant and 'local' readers, literary festivals and agencies such as the British Council, the project staged an encounter between migrant literary production and the public sphere on an unprecedented scale.</p> <p>The research had several specific impacts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) It enriched and expanded the cultural lives, imaginations and sensibilities of the 250 individuals, gathered in reading groups across four continents. (ii) It expanded public discourse on migration and identity, encouraging a wide range of people outside academia to engage with questions of multiculturalism and diasporic identity. In particular it reached young people and schools, running a poetry competition for children, establishing a youth theatre company, and developing resources for schools. (iii) It produced print and online outputs to transmit, expand and entrench public discussion of migration and identity, including a database and a major anthology of diasporic poetry. (iv) It helped to establish best practice for mass reading events and literary festivals, particularly those concerned with reflecting the multiculturalism of modern British literature.
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>The research was conducted as part of a 3-year (2007-2010) AHRC-funded project (G1) for which James Procter (at Newcastle since 2006) was PI, with Gemma Robinson (moved to Stirling from Newcastle 2006), Jackie Kay (Newcastle since 2004) and Bethan Benwell (Stirling) as Co-Is. Using a range of novels by authors such as Chinua Achebe, Zadie Smith, Andrea Levy and Monica Ali the project asked how ordinary readers (as opposed to academic critics) in different locations made sense of the same texts, all of which have played a formative role in debates about migration. Procter co-ordinated a series of reading groups in the UK (from Penzance to Glasgow), Africa (Lagos, Kano, Tetuan), India (New Delhi), the Caribbean (Port of Spain, Kingston), and Canada (Toronto). Discussion at these groups was recorded and analysed (1). The study revealed that readers generally situate their readings within immediate local, regional and national contexts, challenging received wisdom and scholarship in the field which speaks of dislocated and 'deterritorialised' audiences. The project concluded that place, location and territory remain crucial to the way we make sense of the world and the text, not despite, but because of, migration and globalisation.</p> <p>In further work, Procter analysed the differences between 'professional' and 'lay' responses to postcolonial literature (2), the dynamics of book groups reading diasporic literature, and the operation – and limitations – of the burgeoning phenomenon of mass read events (3).</p> <p>There were two other important outputs of the research: a substantial project website (4), featuring short pieces by a range of selected writers and a searchable database documenting the diasporic arts in Scotland since 1980 (with embedded audio and video recordings); and a verse anthology by British Black and Asian writers addressing questions of migration and identity (5). Featuring a roster of eminent contributors (e.g. John Agard, David Dabydeen, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Derek Walcott, Wole Soyinka), this constitutes what Kwame Dawes has called 'the most comprehensive gathering of Black and Asian British poets in any single volume.'</p>
<p>3. References to the research</p> <p>(1) Benwell, B., Procter, J. and Robinson, G. (eds.) (2011) 'Reading After Empire', <i>New Formations</i>, 73. Special Issue containing an essay by the editors, 'Not Reading <i>Brick Lane</i>', pp.90-116. REF2 output: 184040.</p>

Impact case study (REF3b)

- (2) Procter J. (2009) 'Reading, Taste and Postcolonial Studies: Professional and Lay Readers of *Things Fall Apart*', *Interventions*, 11, 180-198. REF2 output: 157469.
- (3) Procter J. and Fuller D. (2009) 'Reading as 'Social Glue': Book Groups, Multiculture, and *Small Island* Read 2007', *Moving Worlds*, 9, 26-40. . Available at: http://eprints.bham.ac.uk/290/1/fuller_Procter.pdf.
- (4) 'Devolving Diasporas' website, including 'Diasporic Scotland Database'. Available at: <http://www.devolvingdiasporas.com/database.htm> (2007-10).
- (5) Kay, J., Procter, J. and Robinson, G. (eds.) (2012) *Out of Bounds: British Black and Asian Poets*. Tarsnet: Bloodaxe Books. Available on request.
- G1. Procter, J. (2006) 'Diasporas, Migration & Identities'. AHRC Grant (£234,124), ref. BH061317.

4. Details of the impact

(i) Book groups: enriching lives and enhancing public understanding of migration and identity

At the core of the project was the co-ordination of book groups in libraries, in homes and in British Council offices around the world (including in New Delhi; Kano; Toronto; Kingston; Port of Spain) as well as in the UK. These book groups contained 250 non-academic readers across more than 30 groups. Each group was provided with the same series of works of diasporic literature by post-colonial and migrant writers, from Chinua Achebe to Zadie Smith.

Transcripts of discussions (**IMP2**) demonstrate that the group members' reading often played a significant role in changing their understandings of migration, diaspora and racism in the modern world. Irrespective of whether they were in Britain, India, Nigeria, Canada or the Caribbean, readers routinely commented that their outlooks had been expanded ('I was exposed to books I wouldn't normally have read') and that the work of Achebe, Junot Diaz, Hari Kunzru and others was 'an eye opening read for all of us ... seeing things in a different way from a different perspective'. Readers characteristically tended to identify strongly with characters in the books and to transpose to their own local situations the conditions and events described in the fictions.

Though set in London, the racism described in Levy's *Small Island* and Smith's *Brick Lane*, for instance, was discussed in terms of readers' own experiences, whether in the Gorbals in Glasgow, Toronto, the Caribbean, India or West Africa. 'Here even in Ghana when ... you talk and you have a Nigerian accent it's I mean it's the way you talk and they start looking down at you', commented one reader. And readers were moved to confess their own propensity to discriminate: 'in our own way we're racists', commented a reader in New Delhi speaking of southern Indians and Bengalis. The book groups encouraged readers to draw upon narratives of difference to make sense of similar dilemmas in their own lives, and in many cases to develop their own sense of diasporic identity. One Nigerian reader commented that the books helped him in 'accepting me for who I am, I'm talking about *me* as in my nation and my race'. 'I felt I was alone,' but reading the books in the group, he said, 'gives you a sort of relief that somebody's sharing that'. Participating in the project made him realise that 'I can now learn to adapt to wherever I find myself'. Many of the book groups have continued to meet following the end of the project.

(ii) Mass read events: encouraging public engagement with literature, informing cultural practice

In addition to the mass reading event at its core, the 'Devolving Diasporas' project has supported a further series of public reading events, particularly those concerned with diasporic and multicultural literature. These include the annual Common Book Project, consisting of the cost-price distribution of novels throughout Newcastle as well as discussion groups drawn from across the student body of the two universities in the city, and culminating in a public interview with the author. These mass read events began in 2008 with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*, which brought the author to Newcastle's Northern Stage theatre to be interviewed by one of the Devolving Diasporas team, Prof. Jackie Kay, in front of a live audience of 400. A 2011 event supported by the Booker Prize Foundation followed the same pattern and brought Andrea Levy, author of one of the Devolving Diasporas texts, to Northern Stage where she was interviewed by Kay before an audience of more than 300. The 2012 Arts Council England-funded Newcastle 'Festival of Belonging' was another important legacy of Devolving Diasporas. This brought together writers including Tahmima Anam, Daljit Nagra, Hari Kunzru, Helen Oyeyemi, Sapphire and others for a series of workshops and talks for the general public that picked up on the questions posed by the original project, such as 'Does your identity change when you are forced to move country, or when you choose to leave your homeland?', 'Can you feel a sense of belonging at the same time as a sense of estrangement?' and 'Can you be simultaneously placed and misplaced?' Nicholas

Impact case study (REF3b)

Baumfield, Senior Relationship Manager at Arts Council England, has commended the Festival for an 'exciting and engaging programme of events, talks and projects' that was 'successful in attracting a large and interested audience'. He singled out the Festival as 'an outstanding example of the Arts Council's evolving diversity policy, called the Creative Case' which 'builds on the legal and business cases for making diversity central to the arts'. 'There are still relatively few examples of its successful implementation', Baumfield notes, 'The Festival of Belonging, however, modelled what this policy means in practice and how it can by example influence the cultural sector.' **(IMP3)**. As a result of Procter's expertise in both the practice and scholarly evaluation of such enterprises **(3; G1)**, he has acted as advisor for a number of international events too, including an Australian project to organise and analyse mass reading of Australian fiction, particularly by aboriginal readers (2013), and the 50th anniversary celebrations of the publication of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in 2008, to which he was invited to contribute by the Achebe Foundation and the British Council. For this Procter set up a live link-up between readers in Nigeria (Lagos and Kano) and the UK (London and Glasgow), and, following the protocols of 'Devolving Diasporas' (which were in themselves an important methodological impact of the research), discussions were recorded and transcribed. Participants spoke of the impact of Achebe's on them: 'The book really touch me as I felt that as a person of Nigerian descent [in London] I had lost the rich cultural history that displayed in the book. I really feel westernised and out of touch with my cultural roots.' **(IMP4)**.

(iii) Young people: expanding public discourse, creating educational and cultural opportunities

'Devolving Diasporas' was specifically designed to encourage young people to engage with questions of migration and national identity and to think about the place of migrants in the continuing construction of this identity. This was achieved in a number of ways:

(a) The poetry anthology *Out of Bounds* **(5)** was designed to be used by children and in schools. It was reviewed in *The School Librarian* as a 'superb, relevant, topical, crucial, important anthology [that] should be in every secondary school and sixth-form library'. In the journal of the international English Speaking Board, it was commended as 'a book in which teachers would find stimulating new poems to introduce to their students' **(IMP5)**. It is being used in schools, particularly in Scotland. The 'For Teachers' section of the Scottish Poetry Library for instance suggests using the volume during Black History Month ('Teaching S5 and S6? Have a look at *Out of Bounds* edited by Jackie Kay, James Procter and Gemma Robinson. This anthology of poems by British black and Asian poets is organised into different regions of the UK') **(IMP6)**. More generally, the subjects and findings of the project feature on the 'Moving People, Changing Places' website, designed as an open learning resource for secondary level students **(IMP7)**. Lesson plans for teachers on the website link directly to the material derived from *Devolving Diasporas*. 'Moving People, Changing Places' features on the online *Times Educational Supplement Direct* ('Largest network of teachers in the world'). It received 34,807 hits in the year from May 2012 **(IMP8)**. Together, *Out of Bounds* and the *Devolving Diasporas* website provide a coherent set of resources for the delivery of the Citizenship curriculum at key stages 3 and 4, specifically linking to key concept 1.3: 'Identities and diversity: living together in the UK', as well as other subjects including History, Geography, Religion and Personal, Social, Health and Economic education (PSHE). *Out of Bounds* has also had a significant impact as a teaching and learning resource at HE level, where its reach continues to develop. For example, Edinburgh University has placed the text on their reading list for a core module of their MSc in Creative Writing, and Leicester University use it as a primary text on a level 3 English undergraduate module ('Transcultural writing and the publishing industry').

(b) In 2009 Procter and his team organised a poetry competition for Scotland's young writers (aged 12-17), asking entrants to reflect on the nation's cultural identity and themes of belonging, dislocation and difference. The competition worked to signal the diasporic contribution to Scottish national culture, and raise awareness around that subject in a creative, rather than issue-based fashion. Over 300 young people entered the competition, and the range and depth of the poems they submitted clearly showed that the project had encouraged them to think about these social issues. Winning poems were published on the 'Whose Scotland?' and AHRC websites, ensuring that they reached a wide and diverse audience.

(c) The project provided start-up funding for the Macrobert Youth Dance Company (MYDC). As Liam Sinclair, Artistic Director and Chief Executive of the Macrobert says, 'the *Devolving Diasporas* team worked with macrobert to develop a new youth theatre piece based on Jackie Kay's *The Adoption Papers*' which 'became the macrobert Youth Dance Company's first theatre production'.

Impact case study (REF3b)

Following performances in Stirling, MYDC took its production to the Edinburgh Festival Fringe (Aug. 2008). The start-up funding and support had additional significance in that it enabled MYDC to become a sustainable organization. As Sinclair notes, the company's dancers, drawn from 11-17 year olds in central Scotland, 'meet once a week for three terms each year' and have performed throughout Scotland and England', including with La Fura Dels Baus, a highly acclaimed physical theatre company from Barcelona (2011) and among 1000 young dancers at the Southbank Centre's summer 2012 Festival of the World (**IMP9**).

(iv) Project outputs: expanding and entrenching public discussion of migration and identity

Two of the project's outputs have been instrumental in extending and improving the quality of the material available for public discussion of migration, and diasporic literature, particularly regarding its non-metropolitan dimensions. These are the project's website (**4**), which surveys the diaspora arts in Scotland since 1980, and the anthology *Out of Bounds* (**5**), which is structured so that its sections are comprised of poetry concerned with the different and distinct regions of the UK. 'This organising system', as the reviews have noted, ensures that the anthology 'make a most critical point – that all of Britain has been fully "colonised" by these Black and Asian poets through their physical and imaginative occupation of the space.' (**IMP1**). Both resources have attracted a substantial public audience. *Out of Bounds*, described by Fred D'Aguiar as 'an alternative A-Z of the nation', has sold over 1000 copies in the year since publication (a remarkable number for an anthology of modern poetry). It has provided the focus for sessions at literary festivals and events across Britain. These have including the 'Festival of Belonging' in Newcastle (2012), the Manchester Literary Festival (2012), and the Edinburgh City of Literature programme (2013). In September 2012, the British Library organised an event around *Out of Bounds* (called in their publicity an 'extensive and ground-breaking' and 'definitive anthology') to run alongside their exhibition 'Writing Britain: Wastelands to Wonderlands', their contribution to the Cultural Olympiad (**IMP10**). One further important output of the project, designed to reach a general rather than academic audience, has been a series of 'Critical Perspective' essays written by Procter for the British Council website (e.g. on Suhayl Saadi, Mohsin Hamid, Andrea Levy, Amit Chaudhuri, Amitav Ghosh and others). Reaching a diverse, extensive and international audience, these publications, like the database and *Out of Bounds*, have made a significant contribution to the enrichment of public discourse and the development of public understanding of migration and identity issues as they have been expressed in post-War English-language literature.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- IMP1** Kwame Dawes, 'Two Substantial Anthologies', review of *Out of Bounds*, *Poetry Review*, 102, iv (2012). Available at: <http://www.poetrysociety.org.uk>.
- IMP2** Devolving Diasporas Book Group Transcripts.
- IMP3** Nicholas Baumfield, Senior Relationship Manager, Arts Council England. Testimonial Letter, 28 October 2013.
- IMP4** Recorded discussions, as well as subsequent correspondence from participants, about 50th anniversary of *things fall apart* exchange.
- IMP5** Reviews of *Out of Bounds: British Black and Asian Poets*. Frank Startup, *The School Librarian*, 60, iii (2012), 144-45. Elizabeth Oakley, *Speaking English*, 45, ii (2012), 40.
- IMP6** Scottish Poetry Library. 'For Teachers' (2013). Available at: <http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/learn/teachers>.
- IMP7** 'Reading, migration and the imagination', on 'Moving People, Changing Places' website. Available at: <http://www.movingpeoplechangingplaces.org/identities-cultures/writing-and-reading-diasporas.html>
- IMP8** Usage statistics for <http://www.movingpeoplechangingplaces.org/>, generated 25 April 2013.
- IMP9** Testimonial Letter from Liam Sinclair, Artistic Director and Chief Executive of Macrobert Arts Centre, 7 Nov. 2013
- IMP10** 'Out of Bounds: Black and Asian Poets on Britain', British Library website. Available at: <http://www.bl.uk/whatson/events/event131376.html>

Hard copies or electronic versions of these documents are available on request.